

3 International RPL practice

This chapter considers international RPL practice. It identifies international RPL projects to demonstrate the value placed on RPL by international bodies. It then examines RPL practice in the United Kingdom, the province of British Columbia in Canada and South Africa, and draws parallels with Australian experience.

3.1 International projects

Several international projects are in place, most of which focus on qualifications frameworks and how they may be used in developing lifelong learning frameworks. While some of these projects are broader than RPL, they include an emphasis on RPL and the way in which learning is recognised in general. The international projects that we have identified include:

- an OECD thematic review on “The role of national qualifications systems in promoting lifelong learning”. This includes a focus on how learning is recognised and credentialled, and the way in which formal, informal and non-formal learning contributes to qualifications systems. Australia is a participant in this project.
- a European Union funded project on the accreditation of prior learning as a mechanism for overcoming social exclusion. This two year project includes five countries and is cross-sectoral (Cleary *et al.*, 2002).¹⁰
- another European Union funded project co-ordinated by the European Universities Continuing Education Network on the development of European-wide credit transfer and credit accumulation systems with a focus on the transfer between formal, informal and non-formal education.¹¹
- a project on lifelong learning conducted by the *Asia-Europe Meeting* (ASEM), which was established in 1996 and brings together 15 European Union member states and 10 Asian states. It is described as “an informal process of dialogue and co-operation” around “political, economic and cultural issues.”¹² The ASEM has in place a lifelong learning initiative with three projects or areas, one of which is “Integrated Approaches to Lifelong Learning and recognition of skills and prior learning”.¹³

These projects will enrich our understanding of RPL practice and policy, and will inform the way policy is developed in Australia. We need to ensure strategies are in place so that we can learn from these projects.

3.2 Britain

Recognition of prior learning in Britain is commonly referred to as the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or sometimes the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) to distinguish it from the recognition of previous certificated/accredited learning. On the face of it, APL/APEL seems to be more widespread in the higher education (HE) sector than in the

¹⁰ See <http://hp1.gcal.ac.uk:7777/crll/index.html> for more information. Site accessed on 14/8/2002

¹¹ See <http://www.transfine.net/> for more information, site accessed 14/8/2002

¹² See <http://www.uvm.dk/asem/aseminfo.shtml>, accessed 14/8/2002

¹³ See <http://www.uvm.dk/asem/group2.shtml> accessed 14/8/2002

further education (FE) sector, which is roughly the equivalent of our vocational education and training sector. As a consequence of contacting individuals in Scotland we were provided with information about APL projects conducted in the early 1990s (discussed later) and case studies on best practice in APL dated 2000 (SQA 2000). Beyond this, we could not identify *any* literature that discussed APEL in further education, with the exception of the European Union project report on APEL as a mechanism for social inclusion (Cleary, Whittacker *et al.* 2002). This report lamented the lack of APEL in the FE sector, and the authors said they had difficulty in identifying FE colleges that used APEL to an extent that allowed them to include a college in their case studies. Personal contacts confirmed that APEL was practised little in FE in Britain. The EU project national report on England stated that APEL was used in FE in England in the mid-90s for entry, accreditation and advanced standing, but is used less now, principally because of the costs involved (Merrill 2001). The authors of the EU national report on Scotland suggested that “it may be that the practice of APEL is operating at a very informal level and not being recorded in ways which make it easily identifiable” in FE (Cleary, Whittacker *et al.* 2001: 7). However, they said they had no evidence that this was the case.

We found this apparent lack of APEL in FE puzzling, given that the FE system is based on competency-based training as is the case in Australia, and in light of the prominence given to RPL in our system. CBT in theory should lend itself to RPL, as the focus is on the competency outcomes, and enabling people to be assessed on the basis of competence whenever and however it is acquired, and not time served in formal learning programs.

Major APL projects were conducted in Scotland in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the FE sector, and as a consequence the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC) included APL as an acceptable assessment approach that could be used in qualifications, and trained its verifiers and supplied guidance for assessors and internal verifiers in colleges as to how to handle APL evidence. APL centres were established with APL co-ordinators (SCOTVEC, 1992). However, even though a national framework was put in place, it does not seem to have been implemented by providers to any great extent, because of the cost of implementation. The Scottish projects conceived of APL as just one way of being assessed for a qualification, alongside many other processes of assessment. APL was different to other forms of assessment because it used information and testimony from a person’s previous experience, instead of the ‘normal’ assessment activity. In other words, it was portfolio based, but was nonetheless fundamentally a process of assessment.

APL was found to be a reasonable assessment technique, but the problem lay in the *process*. Most APL candidates needed support in learning how to construct a portfolio, particularly those who had not been through the qualification system. Group processes were used to support candidates, but when it came down to matching individual learning and experience to individual qualifications and competencies, personal support was often required. The process was labour and resource intensive. Many found it easier to enrol students and assess them there and then (interview). There is also some anecdotal evidence that learners preferred a more traditional process, being focused as much on the learning, which often had a social aspect, as on the accreditation.

In some parts of the system it can be difficult to distinguish between work-based assessment and APL or APEL, the common factor being the absence of a structured or formal learning programme or context. If the assessment processes are aligned with the qualification outcomes the difference between RPL and work-based assessment in some instances may

only be one of reporting, and not of substance. The Scottish projects specifically distinguished between APL and assessment on demand. APL was portfolio based, whereas assessment on demand involved assessing students using the 'normal' assessment used to assess students for competence within courses. Both have in common the principle that students may not necessarily need to go through a learning program because they are competent; where they differ is in the assessment process. An email from one of the people involved in the Scottish projects explained that for those seeking accreditation of their occupational competence, APL was overtaken by the introduction of the Scottish Vocational Qualifications (the equivalent of Australian training packages), and that "When this competency based system was introduced, candidates could demonstrate their competence through workplace demonstrations" (Irving, 2002). This process is referred to as accelerated assessment. The cost of the process is also much lower. This does not resolve the problem for those who are not in work and hence do not have a work environment in which to demonstrate competence, nor does it solve the problem for those whose prior learning has been outside the workplace, and in broader community contexts. In these instances, students will need to use APEL.

Initially, when RPL was first implemented in Australia it focussed on the portfolio approach, but work in recent years has extended the concept to include *all* forms of assessment of prior learning, and not just portfolios. RPL refers to assessment processes used to assess an individual's prior learning – not just one form of assessment. If we use this understanding of RPL and apply it to FE in Britain, it appears that it may be more commonly used than is indicated in the literature.

Notwithstanding the above, it appears that APL/APEL is again becoming an issue for FE in Scotland, as one mechanism that can help to address future demographic and skills issues. The Scottish Case studies document five examples where APL was used by firms (all of which appeared to be enterprise based providers) as an integrated part of a training program leading to the award of qualifications. It has also been raised in relation to recognising the skills of asylum seekers and refugees (Hart, 2002).

APEL seems to be growing as a practice in the higher education sector (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000; Merrill, 2001; Cleary *et al.*, 2002). However, as with Australia, most discussion is on the potential benefits rather than actual benefits of APEL. Different models are used, reflecting different approaches and attitudes about assessment. These vary from:

- 'straight forward' processes of matching prior learning to specific and non-negotiable learning outcomes in specific modules or subjects (which seemed to be the most common approach);
- 'holistic' assessments that consider the individual's experience and learning and award credits on that basis, while not necessarily matching the credit to specific subjects; and,
- flexible models where the learning outcomes are themselves negotiable, and are constructed in partnership between the student and the University, and sometimes the student's workplace. This last model has most in common with Boud's views of work-based learning (Boud, 1998).

A major 'audit' of APEL in higher education institutions was conducted in 2000 by the Learning From Experience Trust, and was funded by the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE) for England. The take-up of APEL is still relatively low, and there are familiar problems with tracking and monitoring both the extent to which APEL is used and

its outcomes. It is developing fastest in professional areas in higher education, particularly at the post-graduate level, but has not been effective as a mechanism for social inclusion. It is most likely to occur in the 'new universities' (the old polytechnics), particularly those with large student populations, and a high percentage of mature aged and part-time students. It is most often granted at earlier stages in a degree, but some of the new universities permit it at later years as well. Most universities have restrictions on the extent it can be used, and the level of credit that can be granted (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000).

Most institutions distinguish between the different stages of APEL, particularly between the guidance and advice roles on the one hand, and the assessment role on the other. Much coursework assessment in the UK is assessed internally and moderated by the examining boards. This involves external moderation of all assessment, where an external verifier confirms the assessment judgements that have been made by the university, rather than actually assessing the candidate directly. The processes used to assess APEL reflect this broader culture (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000).

APEL is conducted on a one-by-one basis with individuals, but some institutions prefer to work with groups as this is more cost-effective. This approach has helped to open new markets, particularly in professional areas, and has also had the effect of opening higher education to processes of change in the knowledge and skill requirements in the labour market. This is particularly the case in newly emerging industries where the process of knowledge creation and technological innovation has not yet been reflected in the university (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000).

Some institutions provide a module or a subject that students can enrol in to prepare their APEL application, and of these, two thirds provide credit for completing the APEL subject as well as the APEL claim (should it be successful). This enables students to use their current learning to reflect on their past experiences, and to relate it to their current course. Another practice was to require students to prepare a proposal for their RPL, which must be agreed to by the institution, and which is subject to negotiation between the individual and the university. The outcome of this process results in agreements about the level and extent of credit to be awarded should the claim be successful. These two strategies are most common in institutions that have a commitment to flexible learning strategies, rather than requiring students to match their prior learning to pre-determined and fixed learning outcomes (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000).

Three models of charging students for RPL were identified: first, a cost-recovery schedule of fees; second, charging what the market will bear; and, third, a loss-leader model, which aims to use the APEL process to create new markets. Most universities have a mixture of devolved and centralised processes for managing APEL, with the new universities most likely to have a devolved framework that operates within the context of central guidelines. The authors of the APEL in higher education report favoured this model as one that enabled APEL to become embedded in the life of the institution. They regarded APEL as a subset of flexible learning, and that when this is in place APEL was more likely to occur, and lead to diverse outcomes (Learning From Experience Trust, 2000).

3.3 Canada: the province of British Columbia

It is useful to make comparisons between Canada and Australia. The countries have comparable sized populations (Canada has approximately 31 million people, and Australia approximately 19 million) which are located in the urban centres, with a vast and sparsely populated hinterland; both are federations with states or provinces; both are part of the Commonwealth; and they have similar systems of government (Albrecht, 2001). Both countries have had RPL policies in place since the late 1980s. In Canada, responsibilities for education and training are located mainly in the provinces, and these responsibilities are not shared between the provinces and the central government to the extent that they are shared between the states and the federal government in Australia. Despite this there are commonalities across the provinces, and in the area of RPL this expressed in the existence of the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) (Albrecht, 2001).

This report focuses on the province of British Columbia, which has invested much time and resources in developing RPL policies and an infrastructure to support its implementation. RPL is known in Canada as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) or Prior Learning and Assessment Recognition (PLAR). British Columbia has 28 differentiated, publicly funded post-secondary institutions, which include:

- ‘traditional research oriented universities’ that grant degrees, and higher research degrees;
- specialised universities, which offer undergraduate and graduate credentials as well as certificates and diplomas in selected and applied fields
- a technical university, which offers technical bachelor degrees that combine practical skills and theoretical knowledge
- university colleges, provincial institutes and aboriginal institutes, which offer two year associate degrees that are a pathway to four year degrees in the universities, or an exit in their own right, and adult basic education; developmental education; apprenticeship training; career, technical, and vocational training
- the Open Learning Agency, which offers four year bachelor degrees and two year associate degrees in partnership with other agencies

PLA has been supported by the British Columbia provincial government since the late 1980s, and in 1993 a province wide standing committee was formed, reporting to the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer. Province-wide guidelines and standards were developed and training events held. The government provides implementation and enhancement grants to institutions, and 27 of the 28 post-secondary institutions were offering PLA by 2000. There is considerable diversity in the way PLA is implemented across institutions, as institutions developed their processes independently, although this is within the context of province-wide leadership. The provincial focus in 2001 has been on making PLA sustainable and efficient (Barker, 2001).

Institutions report to the provincial government on PLA outcomes, although there is some concern about the consistency in reporting (Barker, 2001). This does, however, allow some examination of outcomes. It is estimated that the number of students receiving PLA were 2824 in 2000/2001. The numbers of students receiving PLA were relatively constant from 1999/2000 to 2000/2001, but the effective full-time equivalent value of PLA assessment increased by 45% over that time. That is, approximately the same number of students were

receiving PLA, but they were being granted credit for a greater component of their course (Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology, 2001).

PLA students comprised almost 8% of students responding to the 2001 provincial student outcomes survey (1433 PLA students compared to 17,134 non-PLA students). PLA students outperformed other students by achieving higher course completion rates (86% cf 70%), although they were less likely to proceed to further studies (40% cf 48%). PLA students were more likely to report that they had completely met their main educational objectives (52% cf 47%), were completely satisfied with their educational studies (46% cf 42%), and approximately equal proportions of PLA and non-PLA students felt very well prepared for further educational studies. PLA students were also more likely to report that:

- the program or training was very useful in performing their current job (56% cf 42%);
- they were currently employed in a job related to their course or training (83% cf 65%);
- they found their course or training very useful in obtaining a job afterwards (67% cf 55%);
- their first job obtained after education was very related to the program that they had taken (46% cf 27%); and,
- they were currently employed (82% cf 76%).

(Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology, 2001)

Almost 39% of PLA students were studying at diploma level, approximately 46% were at certificate level or equivalent, and almost 11% were at bachelor degree level. Very few PLA students were university transfer students (2.7%) or were studying for an associate degree (1.8%). PLA students were spread across occupational groups, with the highest percentage concentrated in sales and service (25%), with business, finance and administration following at 22%. The next largest was health occupations (14%). Most PLA respondents (82%) were enrolled in courses that were career/occupational or vocational in nature, with 18% enrolled in academic courses. Much literature has focussed on the potential of RPL/APL in newly emerging industries, where there is a time lag between the emergence of the industry and courses to cater for that industry. Yet it was found in BC that:

“Of all occupational program-based PLA students, 35% pursued studies in programs for which job growth rates were considered ‘below average’ 25% pursued studies in occupations with ‘average’ annual growth rates, while nearly 35% pursued studies in occupations with ‘above average’ growth.”

(Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology, 2001: 8)

British Columbia is creating a vision for PLA for the 21st century, which places PLA as a key strategy in achieving a learning province. They have “a strong cadre of able assessors, advisors and administrators committed to supporting the expansion and development of PLA and related services”, resources, and guidelines “to support the articulation and transferability of credits earned through PLA” (Simosko, 2000: 4). Their challenges are to develop common understandings of PLA across institutions, embed PLA into mainstream institutional life, increase the take-up of PLA, publicise PLA and increase the extent to which PLA assessments are accepted in all post-secondary institutions (Barker, 2001).

They have undertaken research to identify the obstacles and facilitating mechanisms, and their experience accords with ours in Australia. These include the complexity and difficulty of PLA processes; the cost of implementing it, and the cost to the student; inadequate

resources; negative attitudes by students, teaching staff, and business; differential access because of variance in philosophy and practice in post-secondary institutions; and, 'shifting power' which refers to "systemic discrimination and balance of power" (Barker, 2001: 7). This refers to the 'cultural outsidership' experienced by First Nations students, and "visible minorities and other non-traditional students" (Barker, 2001: 7). PLA can act as a mechanism of exclusion when it legitimises "knowledge and skills that reassembles the academic norm and which extends the academy's traditional gate-keeping function of barring alternative cultures of knowledge and calibrates the legitimacy of students' knowledge according to sameness and correspondence" (Thomas cited in Barker, 2000: 7).

While BC has identified these issues as barriers to PLA, they arise as a consequence of *engagement* in the process of implementing PLA and creating an infrastructure able to sustain it. We can learn much from British Columbia.¹⁴

3.4 South Africa

There are two components to South Africa's strategy to implement RPL. The first is through the establishment of a national policy framework developed and implemented by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The second is through the partnerships between institutions and stakeholders to develop and implement innovative practice, research how RPL may be implemented in the South African context, and contribute to strengthening RPL capacity throughout the country.

South Africa is about to embark on a national strategy to develop and embed RPL as a fundamental component of its National Qualification Framework. The South African Qualifications Authority has undertaken an extensive process of consultation in preparing a draft RPL policy. An RPL policy framework was adopted by the SAQA on 12 June 2002, and will now move to the implementation phase. The information we have used in this report is from the draft policy, as the final policy is not yet available.

RPL is a key strategy for post-compulsory education and training in South Africa, because:

"The inclusion of the principle of RPL is fundamental to the development of a new education and training system in South Africa. The principle has its origins in a number of pre-democracy projects and policy-making forums initiated by the trade union movement and the ANC in the late 1980s."

(SAQA, 2002)

While South Africa shares many issues in common with countries such as Australia, Britain and Canada, the scale of the problems that confront them are of a different order of magnitude. Cretchley and Castle (Cretchley and Castle, 2001: 488) explain that:

In South Africa, RPL is bound up with moral and political imperatives to broaden participation in higher education by black South Africans. Thus, RPL is associated not only with issues of individual and social justice, but also with issues of redress."

¹⁴ British Columbia has many resources for practitioners. See the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology at <http://www.c2t2.ca> for more information

This understanding underpins the proposed South African RPL policy framework, which is cross-sectoral. The framework argues that a holistic approach is required, one which pays as much attention to the process supporting individuals to learn how to engage in RPL, as to the RPL assessment process itself. It is recognised that those who have not had experience of education, and those who have had negative experiences of education, may find the RPL process beyond their reach. Also emphasised is the role of RPL in recognising, validating and incorporating ways of knowing and cultural practices and understandings that empowered disadvantaged communities to create a new society. This, the paper argues, challenges curriculum and institutional practices that are drawn from, and reinforce discriminatory and exclusionary beliefs and practices. It is a powerful argument for democratising education and training, and for harnessing it to the social and economic needs of the people and the nation.

The paper cites the Australian experience as one that has not achieved the goals of access and positive outcomes for disadvantaged groups:

“It is clear from both local and international experiences of RPL that the principles of equity, quality and redress, as stated in South Africa’s new education and training policy and legislative framework, are objectives that need an explicit ‘translation’ into RPL practice if they are to be met. The Australian scenario, for example, demonstrates that a more equitable practice of RPL, and the hoped-for increasing access of Aboriginal people to mainstream education, has not taken place – old discriminations and exclusions continue to be practiced, both within institutions and workplaces with regard to education and training (Flowers and Hawke, 2000). A key challenge in South Africa will be to manage the diverse interests and expectations of the stakeholders who will participate in the field of RPL. This calls for a policy that provides direction and support for an evolving system of RPL that is able to go to scale in meeting the challenges of social, economic and human development while at the same time contributing to the overall development, quality and integrity of a National Qualifications Framework.”

(SAQA, 2002)

The features of the draft policy document include:

- creating appropriate institutional contexts and policies. This will require institutions to have policies based on key principles within the National Qualifications Framework, and institutions will be required to demonstrate how they are implementing RPL;
- services and support for learners need to be provided and need to take into account the social context of learners. Support services may include staff whose role is to be an ‘evidence facilitator’, and the provision of formal programs that support people in learning how to prepare the evidence they need for the RPL assessment. Services will also support students after the process, which includes the development of learning pathways;
- training and registration of key staff, including: “evidence facilitators, assessors, moderators, advisors and administrative personnel”;
- methods and processes of assessment that are “systematic, flexible, collaborative and transparent” and involve “the learner and assessor within a specific context and site, such as the workplace or institution of education and training”;
- RPL will “increasingly inform the development of new standards, qualifications, programmes and curriculum”;

- quality management systems that are not RPL specific, but which are “properly integrated into credible quality management systems that prevail in the workplace and in the provider institutions”; and,
- fees and funding for RPL services should not exclude students. Fees should cost less than doing the course, and include flexible payment options

The SAQA’s (2002) strategic plan for implementation includes:

- institutional self-audit procedures, benchmarking workshops and sharing good practice
- “The development of detailed plans to introduce, transform or strengthen quality assurance systems and procedures at all levels and locations in the system over the next five years....
- The development of dedicated capacity and personnel to drive the implementation of quality assurance systems and processes at all levels and locations in the system....
- The design and moderation of assessment instruments appropriate to RPL assessments against registered standards and qualifications....
- The installation of performance management systems and procedures against which all key personnel can be held accountable for the use of resources and the achievement of agreed targets in agreed timeframes....
- The provision by SAQA and the ETQAs [Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies] of opportunities (seminars, conferences and publications) at which all stakeholders, including candidate learners can profile their work, and contribute to the development of new knowledge in this field.”

The strategies to implement the SAQA RPL policy framework have been preceded by national projects which aimed to support the development of RPL in South Africa. This included a major two year project which was a joint venture between the Human Sciences Research Council, the University of Cape Town, and Peninsula Technikon (Harris, 1997).

Another major two year project is underway, this time by the Joint Education Trust in South Africa on RPL, with the aim of informing “the further planning of quality RPL programmes in South Africa over the next decade.”¹⁵ The Joint Education Trust (2002) was established as a partnership between leading South African companies, who joined with “the leading political parties, labour unions, business and education organisations, recognising that although coming from different perspectives all these organisations shared a common goal: to improve the quality of education and to transform the existing system into one more equitable for all South Africa’s citizens.”

The South Africans are engaged in a process that will have many lessons for Australia, particularly relating to how to increase access to post-compulsory education and training using RPL as a strategy, and in contributing to the transformation of institutional practices, courses and curriculum to ensure the outcomes meet the needs of all stakeholders.

¹⁵ See <http://www.jet.org.za/projects/default.asp?id=27>, accessed 14/8/2002

3.5 Issues in common with Australia

There are many parallels between the British, Canadian and South African experiences of RPL and our experiences in Australia. Much of the research and policy frameworks focus on the potential benefits, rather than the actual benefits. The difficulties, barriers and problems resonate with our experience. Examples of good practice have been implemented and we can learn much from these, as researchers and practitioners in each of these countries have attempted to draw general lessons for how policy frameworks should be developed.

It is clear that RPL is set to become a major factor in the development of post-compulsory education and training systems around the world. This is further reinforced by the various international projects currently underway. Australia will need to develop strategies to ensure that we learn from overseas experiences, and that we are able to contribute our own findings and lessons on how RPL may be extended.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined international projects currently underway. While the focus of several of these is on qualifications frameworks and processes of recognising learning, this includes an emphasis on RPL as an intrinsic component of lifelong learning frameworks. The chapter also examined how RPL was implemented in Britain, in the province of British Columbia in Canada, and in South Africa. Many parallels between the experiences in these countries with Australia were noted, as was the need to develop strategies to ensure that we can learn from overseas experience, while contributing our own findings and lessons.